



Belisarius: The Last Roman General

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Hughes has written a lively and detailed account of Belisarius's remarkable career." - Adrian Goldsworthy, author of *The Complete Roman Army*

Belisarius (c. 505–565 AD) was the greatest general of the Eastern Roman Empire and is among history's most notable military personalities. At the age of 29, he twice defeated the Persians and reconquered North Africa from the Vandals, before going on to regain the Italian peninsula from the Ostrogoths, including the Eternal City, Rome. Fighting in the name of Justinian I, Belisarius recaptured large portions of the original territory of the ancient Roman Empire. However, Byzantium was both unwilling and incapable of retaining much of Belisarius's hard-won advances, and soon after his death, the empire once again retracted.

In *Belisarius: The Last Roman General*, historian Ian Hughes recounts the life of this great soldier. In addition, he explains the evolution of classical Roman armies and systems of warfare into those of the Byzantine Empire, as well as those of their chief enemies, the Persians, Goths, and Vandals. Based on ancient source and drawing on a wealth of modern research, Belisarius's career is set in the context of the turbulent times in which he lived and his reputation is reassessed to give a balanced portrait of this neglected giant among ancient commanders.

Belisarius: The Last Roman General Details

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From Reader Review Belisarius: The Last Roman General for online ebook

Christopher says

Considering most biographies on old Belli' are quite old and often repeat their sources uncritically, this is a welcome and modern update to the saga of one of the greatest Roman generals.

Robert says

Great book.

Carlos says

This was a good book if you are interested in Byzantine politics, with a focus on the time of Justinian. I have always been interested in the Byzantines since to me they signify a glamorous part of history, half ancient , the other half modern. But everyone involved in this subject cannot help and wonder what would have happened had the Byzantine empire been strong enough to reunite the Western part of the Roman empire once more, well The Emperor Justinian tried to do just that in the 6th century (he is the one that ordered the construction of the Haga Sophia church) , he almost succeeded, he conquered Italy, Africa, Sardica, Sardinia, the Italian Peninsula and even Spain, but he could not had done any of that without his commander Belisarius, not a lot of information is known about him, Thtas why I read this book, it was an attempt to gain some info about this much important historical figure, and in that sense this book succeeded , there are some grammatical errors and dubious sources in some point (that's why its not a 5 star book) but you do learn about the politics, fighting and diplomacy style of the Byzantine through the character of Belisarius. I recommend this book to any lover of classical history.

Matthew Storm says

I applaud Ian Hughes for attempting the first English language biography of the great general, Flavius Belisarius in nearly two hundred years. The paucity of current scholarly (or popular) writing on him is a mystery bordering on tragic. In a world in desperate need of heroes, of people that inspire through deeds not words, of public figures who are decent, honest and incorruptible and selfless - it would seem that Flavius Belisarius' story is as salient and powerful today as it was when Procopius first wrote of him 1,500 years ago...

Onto Ian Hughes oftentimes excellent work. As other reviewers have noted, the author did an superb job reviewing the primary sources on Belisarius (limited as they are), teasing out the facts, and reconstructing the General's martial exploits. That is where the book excels, as a scholarly work focused on Belisarius' extraordinary military achievements (as well as the strategy and tactics of the General's opponents).

What is exceptional about the book also makes it disappointing as a popular biography. Mr. Hughes focuses on the facts but does not delve into the more speculative world of Belisarius' past, his motivations, his

personality - in short, the 'softer' aspects of the General that cannot help but captivate the (admittedly small) circle of his admirers.

So, in conclusion, this is a book that does us a great service looking at the military exploits of Justinian's general, the 'Autokrator' with fresh and unbiased eyes. That said, those looking for a more romantic, and sympathetic look at the General's life may be disappointed.

Dom Moulding says

Thoroughly interesting and well written. Very good book about a period of history I knew little about. The author does however rely heavily on Procopius' (sp?) accounts and makes some assumptions based upon the limited sources available, he also presents a very favourable - although not necessarily inaccurate - portrayal of Belisarius. As a newcomer to the topic I found the book very good but it the conjecture may be frustrating for anyone well versed in the era.

George Serebrennikov says

From the perspective of military historian, who is interested in weaponry, battle formations and detailed accounts of military campaigns, it is probably very informative and interesting book. I, however, more interested in Belisarius as a man, and I do not think the author did a good job describing that. I also did not like the way the book is written, sometimes I was just bored, and had to put the book away, and it took me a significant amount of time to finish it.

Joel Nicholson says

Was nice for an introduction to a topic I did not know much about. However I found myself bored and forcing myself to get through it.

Mike Day says

Though it gets a bit bogged down in the minutia of sieges and troop movements- especially during its coverage of the torturous gothic wars- "Belisarius" weaves in enough personal information of its eponymous general and broader historical implications for the empire to usually keep things moving along nicely.

Maria Lim says

Great book on Belisarius. I think what is special about this book is that aside from presenting his life as we heard it from Procopius and other primary sources, the author gives his insights/possible theories as to why Belisarius did this or that. It gave me a new perspective about Belisarius that I did not get by reading Mahon or Procopius.

John Conquest says

This is an unedited excerpt from the 537 Siege of Rome chapter.

King Vitiges: "If I assaulted those walls would you die?"

Belisarius: "It would be extremely painful."

King Vitiges: "You're a big legatus."

Belisarius: "For you."

King Vitiges: "Was getting besieged in Rome part of your plan?"

Belisarius: "Of course! Pope Silverius refused our offer in favor of yours, we had to find out what he told you."

Pope Silverius: "Nothing, I said nothing!"

King Vitiges: "Well congratulations, you got yourself besieged!"

Sounds of approaching bucellarii

King Vitiges: "Now what's the next step in your master plan?"

Belisarius: "Crashing this Ostrogothic Kingdom...with no survivors!"

Florentius says

This is a really good modern bio of Belisarius. Highly recommended. After reading this one, I recommend Lord Mahon's classic biography from the 19th century *The Life of Belisarius*. These two books complement each other nicely.

Chris Wray says

This is an ok biography of one of the ancient world's most interesting characters, the Byzantine general Belisarius.

I'll start with the negatives. In some ways, this book highlights the difficulties and limitations faced when writing the biography of an ancient personality for whom there is only relatively sparse documentary evidence for the biographer to draw upon. This is especially seen in the sections on the military equipment, tactics and organization of the Byzantine and contemporary empires. The assumptions and constant hedging was extremely irritating and began to grate on me after a while. While I understand that there are gaps in the evidence, I haven't had the same feelings when reading other books about this and similar periods in history.

Ultimately, the authors' writing style is to blame here as it sometimes communicated, unintentionally I'm sure, a lack of conviction in his analysis and conclusions. At times, I was left asking, "If you're so unsure

about this then why are you expecting me to read it?" The writing style and structure generally was somewhat below par, and it felt to me like the book was under-edited.

That being said, the sections of historical narrative are competently written, and I felt that I got a good overview of the campaigns in North Africa, Persia and Italy. I enjoy this kind of military-historical narrative, though some others would find this material a bit dry. In both North Africa and Italy, Belisarius ultimately prevailed with his grasp of the importance of logistics and his realisation that neither the Vandals nor the Goths had an effective answer to his mounted archers. This period is fascinating, coming as it does in European history between the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the rise of the medieval nation states. In many ways the main players in this tale of international intrigue are more or less weak and faltering. The Byzantine empire is wealthy but brittle and overstretched; Persia is within a generation of being swept away by Islamic conquerors; the Vandalic and Gothic empires are transitory and divided; the Huns will soon disappear as a separate people group altogether. We are given a hint of things to come when the Franks tentatively invade Northern Italy, as they were soon to become the dominant power in Western Europe.

The politics of the day are equally fascinating, albeit complex and bewildering (even Byzantine!). Justinian strikes me as a somewhat weak ruler, dominated by his wife and cronies, and fearful of one of his generals (particularly Belisarius) becoming too powerful or popular and staging a coup. With a more focused set of military objectives, and a less wavering trust in his greatest general, Justinian's military achievements through Belisarius could have been even more extensive, particularly given the inherent weaknesses of the surrounding nations.

The biggest strength of this book comes from the central character in and subject of it, Belisarius himself. He is a fascinating and admirable character, a relatively refined and thoughtful soldier in the midst of brutes, despots, warlords and freebooters. His policy of forbidding his soldiers from pillaging and terrorising civilians would be admirable in a military commander of any era, never mind the time when he lived and fought. In his own lifetime Belisarius had a reputation as incorruptible, and Hughes comments that he "was obviously a man of strong character and outstanding moral bearing, especially when he is compared to his compatriots." He goes on to say that "This was a man who was far above average in his military ability and very far above others in his moral integrity. His grasp of strategic considerations was unmatched and his reactions to events almost faultless. The fact that he lost battles due to either bad planning or by being pressured into fighting by his own men when at a disadvantage means that he cannot be placed on a par with outstanding military leaders such as Julius Caesar or Alexander the Great, but his abilities place him not far below their level." A fitting tribute to an undoubtedly great man.

This biography of Belisarius will be of interest to those who, like me, enjoy military history or learning about period of history, but it isn't quite good enough for me to recommend it to the general reader.

S.J. Arnott says

I found this quite a slog to get through. The book is packed with information and would no-doubt be of interest to anyone undertaking a detailed study of Belisarius' campaigns, but for the most part it came across as a dry re-telling of the contemporary histories with little commentary to bring it to life.

There were also some disconcerting spelling mistakes (obvious ones that should have easily been by picked up by a spell-checker) that made it look as if it had been produced in a hurry.

José Luís Fernandes says

To start, I must say I was a bit hopeful this book might be good by the reviews available here despite being a work of popular History, but I was a bit defrauded while reading it.

The introduction and the first chapters (on the Roman world) are a bit awful, with many real basic mistakes being done there. The contrasting descriptions of the governments of Ravenna and Constantinople and the people from the western and eastern provinces regarding the way how they viewed themselves are completely false as well as the claims that the Romance languages were already around (that's clearly ridiculous and Ian Hughes should learn something about Romance philology), the Equites Sagitarii (called by their Greek equivalent in this book) were the results of Hunnic influence (when they had been around for much longer than that), the equestrians can hardly be called "middle classes" and the medieval Roman world wasn't stagnated. Basically, a person will learn very few actual facts if it won't get confused by them.

The actual description of Belisarius' campaigns are much better, but aren't anything special at all (namely the descriptions of his private life) and the maps lack the movements by the Romans and its enemies through the theatres of operations (which would be certainly a nice addition to it), besides claiming the Suebi were subjects of the Franks (this seems a basic research error). He also sometimes uses Norwich as a source (when he isn't a trustworthy one and even that popular historian wrote his claims didn't have academic pretensions) and his bibliography and notes are non-existent (an horrible flaw especially if someone wants to check his sources), notwithstanding the fact he cites Procopius and Agathias often.

To end this review, this is the kind of popular History I don't like: a book with lots of oversimplifications and mistakes which mislead the public unaware of the actual historical events. I also wonder how Goldsworthy passed many of these mistakes by what I already read from him. Perhaps he advised the author in the right direction, but was simply ignored, but even then I'm a bit disappointed with his support of Ian Hughes' work.

Nick Jones says

I read this because I'm interested in that period of late antiquity turning into the Dark Ages. It's interesting about someone I knew little about, so mission accomplished.

The proof reading left quite a bit to be desired, however, especially in the Latin expressions. "Comitatus" gets misspelled in a number of ways across the entire text.
